

A CRITICAL VIEW ON THE CHARACTER-PAINTING OF
KUMBHAKARṆA IN THE VĀLMĪKI RĀMĀYAṆA

Vālmīki, the pioneer poet of India ie. *Ādikavi*, in his outstanding epic the *Rāmāyaṇa*, has presented numerous interesting aspects which are even now appreciated and accepted in India as the final truth for their status of *Ārṣa vākya*. It is believed that the sages never speak untruth and whatever they visualise through meditation, they express the same in the *Vedas*, *Vedāṅgas*, Indian philosophies, epics and *Purāṇas*. That's why the quotations are often cited by the scholars from these sources as proofs in a number of discussions as the ultimate verdicts. These verdicts are never subject to be challengeable. This attitude of the enlightened mass at large stands as a problem that made us interested to critically analyse one of the characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the so called historical epic of India depicting facts with all credibility. This critical view on Kumbhakarṇa's character would naturally be one of the considerable points to judge the status of the historicity of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

Rāvaṇa was the villain of this epic. As narrated, he was the mighty demon king of Laṅkā purī. He was killed by Rāma, the hero of the epic for abducting Sītā, the heroine from Pañcavaṭī forest. This story is well known to the scholars in the field and hence needs no elaboration. The point however is that why the poet looks forward to present the character of Kumbhakarṇa and what was its significance? The existence of Kumbhakarṇa probably is that the poet wanted to exhibit the supremacy and the valour of Rāma more emphatically by

saying he was not only able to kill the mighty demon Rāvaṇa, but was also capable enough to slay his brother, another physically mightier demon Kumbhakarṇa. This enhanced the power of Rāma which ultimately gave this Kṣatriya prince the status of God in India. It is the faith of the devotees that almighty Rāma, the killer of Kumbhakarṇa and Rāvaṇa, can bestow every thing if he is pleased at all.

The sages and the seers are after all human beings with all their limitations. So that their statements deserve to pass through critical vision before those are accepted. For example, in one occasion the poet Vālmiki says, Kumbhakarṇa was sleeping in a cave having its length and breadth one *Yojan* each¹. The *Rākṣasas* went there to awaken him from the sleep by the order of king Rāvaṇa. However, in another context the poet said, «Rāvaṇa, after occupying the royal throne of Laṅkā from Vaiśravaṇa-Kuvera, on the request of Kumbhakarṇa who was feeling sleepy, built immediately a gem studded beautiful sleeping chamber which had its length of two *yojanas*' and breadth one *yojana*². Thus, it could be said, the measurement given by the poet was not based on the facts, but a simple speculation only. He wanted to depict the demon Kumbhakarṇa an awful figure looking like a terrible giant. Therefore his sleeping chamber must be very unusual and big. But the exact size of the room he could not mention so accurately. However, let us look into the character of Kumbhakarṇa.

A SLEEPING HERO

As depicted in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Kumbhakarṇa was a sleeping hero. He was getting up from his sleep very irregularly, ie. after seven, eight, nine, and ten months intervals³. This description seems to be an exaggeration and unnatural. How could it be possible for one to live without food for about one year? And that too the case of Kumbhakarṇa who likes to take a lot of food at a time. When he was getting up from his sleep, he was consuming a large quantity of food and drink and then again was going to sleep for months together. Rāvaṇa remarked his

1. *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, ii. Gītāpress. ix edn. *Yuddha kāṇḍa*. 60/24,25,41.

2. *Uttara*. 13/3-4.

3. *Yudda*. 60/17.

sleep as *Grāmya sukha*, the pleasure what the inactive people of the countryside enjoy. Kumbhakarna was a person of that sort who was enjoying to sleep and to eat like the ordinary people.

AN EATING HERO

Another absurdity in the character painting of Kumbhakarna is remarkably noticed from his food taking habits. He was just swallowing at once the heap of food kept in his front looking like the mount Meru⁴. The major items what he liked to eat were the huge living animals. He was fond of a lot of flesh and blood. Buffalos and boars were his favourite food. As stated by himself, he was enjoying to eat the monkeys and human beings⁵. This was the common food habit of the *Rākṣasas* in those days⁶. It is quite remarkable that once Kumbhakarna said to Yūpākṣa, a minister of Rāvaṇa: «I shall kill Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and the monkeys and distribute their flesh and blood to the *Rākṣasas* of Laṅkā purī. There after I shall also enjoy to eat them»⁷. As stated by the poet Vālmiki, the inhabitants of Laṅkā were the *Rākṣasas* who were different from the *Asuras*, *Niśācharas*, *Daityas* etc. Rāvaṇa himself addressed Kumbhakarna as a *Rākṣasa* only⁸. The notable aspect of the *Rākṣasas* was their habit to take flesh and blood.

Kumbhakarna had the uncommon habit of taking a huge amount of food including the flesh of human beings, other animals and even his own people. When he was born, he felt very hungry and therefore ate thousands of subjects (*prajā*) as disclosed by his brother Bibhīṣana to Rāma in *Yuddha kāṇḍa*⁹. In consoling Rāvaṇa in the distress Kumbhakarna himself declared that he could be able to eat the three worlds and drink the water of the oceans which would be insufficient to fulfil his stomach¹⁰. Of course this appears to be an exaggeration; still in the purāṇic traditions of India a lot of similar depictions are

4. *Ibid.* 60/31.

5. *Ibid.* 62/79-80.

6. *Ibid.* 62/23.

7. *Ibid.* 62/23.

8. *Ibid.* 62/17.

9. *Ibid.* 61/13.

10. *Ibid.* 63/55-56.

found else where, viz. the sage Agasti once swallowed the entire sea and the sage Jahnu used to drink the entire river Ganges called afterwards Jāhnavī by the power of Yoga. But Kumbhakarna did not possess this yogic power; but he had the inborn capacity of taking the huge amount of food and drink. He had never swallowed the ocean, but simply mentioned it to Rāvaṇa in order to give him some courage. In this sense he had not surpassed Agasti and Jahnu, the Aryan Ṛṣis. Vālmīki being himself an Aryan Ṛṣi has been perhaps partial in high-lighting the Aryan characters in his *Rāmāyaṇa*.

In spite of such exaggerations, it could be summarised that Kumbhakarna was eating a lot of food. Both *Yuddha kāṇḍa* and *Uttara kāṇḍa* agreed him to be a man eater. In *Uttara kāṇḍa* it is described that Kumbhakarna was not satisfied even after taking a huge amount of food. He therefore roamed the three worlds and ate a large number of people including the wise men and the Ṛṣis¹¹. When he was fighting with the Rāma's army, he drank a lot of liquors and became mad to eat his own people along with the monkeys. It is interesting to note, by his single blow 8700 monkeys fell senseless on the ground. Then he placed at once thirty of them under his arms and started to eat one after another like sweets while carefreely roaming in that battlefield¹².

As such his eating and drinking capacity was thus uncommon. While drinking he was not taking a glass of wine but normally thousands of jugs¹³. After awakening from his sleep, he went to take his bath and then immediately drank two thousands of jugs of liquors¹⁴. This description given by the poet Vālmīki, though appears to be strange, as it is never humanly possible, nor even in the case of the elephants, still it is another strange matter that the educated people in this modern age attach faith in it. They never venture to go against the will of the poet who is Krāntadarśī and a Ṛṣi. One may simply take Kumbhakarna a strong man only; but the poet has made much of this by his imaginations in order to generate some excitements in the mind

11. *Uttara*. 9/38.

12. *Yuddha*. 67/6-7.

13. *Ibid*. 60/63.

14. *Ibid*. 60/94.

of the readers. Of course, his imagination was superb and interestingly enough the poet has painted the character of Kumbhakarṇa as a terrible giant.

A TERRIBLE GIANT ROBOT INDEED

In producing the curiosity and excitement the poet wants to create the specific sentiment (*Rasa*) in the character painting of Kumbhakarṇa. So, he has employed the *Vīra-rasa* and *Bhayānaka-rasa* side by side in presenting the terrible giant Kumbhakarṇa in the battle field of Laṅkā purī. By seeing him the Vānara soldiers became terrified and fled away from the battle field. They reached India through the Setu bandha and many of them got drowned in the sea¹⁵. Ultimately when it was announced by the General Aṅgada on the advice of Bibhīṣaṇa that it was nothing but a giant robot, a lifeless machine, the Vānaras again had the courage to come back to the battle field¹⁶.

In this modern age the robot has been invented and does a lot of work. But during those days in the age of *Rāmāyaṇa*, it was really an admirable innovation of Vālmīki to introduce this conception in the human mind. Like-wise, the *Puṣpaka vimāna* was another innovation what might have tempted the human beings to fly in those days. As described in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Bibhīṣaṇa, Hanumān and many others were able to fly through Yoga. But, Rāvaṇa was flying through a plane called *Puṣpaka Vimāna*. However, Kumbhakarṇa didn't have the capacity of flying. He was having a very big physique empowered with uncommon strength like a giant robot. He was so gigantic a figure that simply his presence was causing terror.

To look at, he was a black man. His dark colour was resembling the cloud of the rainy season¹⁷. When he was starting to walk, it was felt as if an earth quake¹⁸. He was in his gigantic figure looking like a big mountain¹⁹. His mouth was so big that it was no less than *Pātāla*, the under-ground world²⁰. His nostrils were as extensive as caves and

15. *Yuddha*. 66/15,17.

16. *Ibid*. 61/3. *Uccyatāṇi vānarāḥ sarve yantrametat samutchrītaṃ*.

17. *Ibid*. 61/3. *Sa toyāmbudasaṃkaśaṃ*

18. *Ibid*. 60/94.

19. *Ibid*. 60/98; 27.

20. *Ibid*. 60/29.

his respiration was causing the mistake of a storm. Therefore, the *Rākṣasas* who went to arouse him from his sleep could not enter into his chamber, but pushed back in the air²¹. His name itself speaks the size of his ears which were as big as pitchers. As a matter of fact, it is clearly stated in the *Uttara kāṇḍa*, there was nobody in *Laṅkā* who could be comparable to the size of *Kumbhakarṇa*²².

The above discussion made us clear that *Kumbhakarṇa* was representing a gigantic figure. But, the description given by the poet that he was like a big mountain, was looking ambiguous, because, *Vālmiki* has employed this analogy with any body who was having a huge figure. *Kumbhakarṇa* himself expressed, *Sugrīva*, the *Vānara*-king was looking like a mountain²³. Thus the word *Parvatākāra* often mentioned by *Vālmiki* is meaningless. It simply states a big size only. As a matter of fact, *Kumbhakarṇa*'s character is nothing, but a poetic imagination only to please the readers through excitements. He was a common man and the historicity behind him is always questionable. If we carefully examine his vigour, it was the same like that of *Hanumān* and *Aṅgada*. But the poet tries to exhibit this character possessing the super and uncommon strength.

HIS STRENGTH NOT UNCOMMON

Physical exercise usually makes a person stronger. But strangely enough *Kumbhakarṇa* was described as a sleeping hero, having no exercise, still he was presented as a valorous person. When by the order of *Rāvaṇa* ten thousands of *Rākṣasas* went to arouse him, they shouted and sounded drums at their first attempt. But all their efforts ended invain. Then they used to hit him by weapons like *Bhuṣuṇḍī*, *Muṣala*, *Gadā*, *Mudgara* etc., but *Kumbhakarṇa* continued to sleep undisturbed²⁴. One can imagine here his strength and at the same time his density of sleep, so sound and deep. The poet was also not satisfied in presenting the uncommon character of *Kumbhakarṇa* within this much. Again he described that the *Rākṣasas* hit him with the

21. *Ibid.* 60/24,25,29.

22. *Uttara*. 9/34. *Pramāṇāt yasya bipulaṃ pramāṇaṃ neha vidyate.*

23. *Yuddha*. 63/39. *Parvata saṃkāśaṃ.*

24. *Ibid.* 60/34-43.

sticks and spear used to control the asses, horses, camels, and elephants; but all of their attempts ended in-vain. Kumbhakarṇa, the mighty demon could not feel any thing²⁵. This is really nothing, but an exaggeration. Still again the poet does not stop here. He narrated further, all the *Rākṣasas* bit his ears, poured in his ears one hundred jugs of water, hit him with special *Mudgaras* affixed with spikes; all were of no use. Finally²⁶ the *Rākṣasas* made to run one thousand elephants on him and then only he got up from his loving sleep²⁷.

This sort of magnification in the character-painting of Kumbhakarṇa ultimately invites absurdity. Still the modern people rely on it. The poet wanted to astound the readers. So, he presented Kumbhakarṇa as a strong giant surpassing ahead in vigour a large number of elephants which becomes some times unbelievable. Some times his fabrications reveal his limitations and contradictions of thoughts.

LIMITATIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS

Vālmīki has described a large number of monkeys by the order of the General Aṅgada climbed on Kumbhakarṇa with a presumption that it was a robot. Then getting the monkeys so close at hand the demon swallowed them one after another. But however, all of them came out safely alive through his nostrils, ears which were so big like the doors of a house interconnected²⁸.

Now the question arises, whether anatomically it is ever possible at all? How is it that the monkeys came out so freely unhurt as if the connections between the nose and the ears inside the mouth was so unobstructed. This appears to be an ignorance of the poet in the sense of anatomy. That's why such unnatural description has taken place in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The poet described the combat between Aṅgada and Kumbhakarṇa. It was found that Kumbhakarṇa could not tolerate the blow of Aṅgada, the son of Vālī, and fell flat senseless on the ground.

25. *Ibid.* 60/45,46.

26. *Ibid.* 60/51-53.

27. *Ibid.* 60/55.

28. *Ibid.* 67/34-35.

The same thing happened with Aṅgada when received a blow from Kumbhakarṇa²⁹. This combat very well stood as the evidence about the strength of the Rākṣasa Kumbhakarṇa. The previous reference given by Vālmīki that Kumbhakarṇa was so uncommonly a valorous giant has been contradicted here when he fell senseless by a blow of Aṅgada. As a matter of fact he was as commonly a hero like Aṅgada.

In another instance, when Kumbhakarṇa applied his spear to kill Sugrīva, the Vānara king, Hanumān jumped up and broke it on the way itself³⁰. Lakṣmaṇa was also able to prevent Kumbhakarṇa through his power of archery to reach Rāma³¹ for which the demon used to praise him. Finally he begged the permission of Lakṣmaṇa to allow him to approach Rāma in fighting. Here the poet has used the word Rāghava in the mouth piece of Kumbhakarṇa: *Tvām anu jnāpya Rāghavaṃ*. The question arises here, how could Kumbhakarṇa know that Rāma was born in the line of Raghu? That was the reason why Rāma was called Rāghava. Previously Vālmīki has not utilised this word Rāghava in the message of Rāvaṇa to Kumbhakarṇa, nor any body has referred to this epithet of Rāma in conversation with Kumbhakarṇa after he got up from his sleep.

Kumbhakarṇa was therefore not so uncommon a personality as described by Vālmīki in his *Rāmāyaṇa*. His valour was the same as Aṅgada, Hanumān and Sugrīva. When Sugrīva snatched away his ears and nose, he could not prevent him. But Vālmīki however tried to exhibit the *Vīra rasa* through the character of Kumbhakarṇa with the intention to magnify the prowess of Rāma who ultimately killed him and became therefore adorable as the incarnation of the almighty God, Viṣṇu.

The poet perhaps was not aware that his fantastic statements would be ever questionable at all, since those are considered to be the *Ārṣa vacana* and so authentic in character. But the critical view would always put question to it and the poet would have no answer. For example in *Yuddha kāṇḍa*, Vālmīki explained through Bibhīṣaṇa that after taking birth Kumbhakarṇa directly ate thousands of subjects

29. *Ibid.* 67/48-49.

30. *Ibid.* 67/63.

31. *Ibid.* 67/106-110.

(*prajā*). Indra, the king of gods came down to fight with him and hit him with his strong weapon Vajra. But this did not cause any injury to Kumbhakarṇa. Kumbhakarṇa in his first attempt rooted out the tusk of Airāvata, the elephant of Indra, and hit the king of gods by that. It became impossible for every body to control him. However to control him Brahmā cursed him to sleep for ever. As said by Brahmā, he would get up only in six months intervals³².

But strangely enough, in *Uttara kāṇḍa* it is stated, the sleep of Kumbhakarṇa was not a curse of Brahmā, but a boon of the same god for which Kumbhakarṇa practised very hard meditation for a very long period of ten thousands of years³³. Here also it could be marked this long period of ten thousands of years to live is never humanly possible. These points stand anomalous in the character painting of Kumbhakarṇa. Else where Vālmīki has stated that Kumbhakarṇa was getting up from his sleep in six, seven, eight, nine, and ten months intervals³⁴. So there was no regularity of six months intervals as stated in the same *kāṇḍa* in another context³⁵. The poet perhaps was not aware of this discrepancy.

The poet Vālmīki, though accepted as a seer, had no doubt every limitation like ordinary human beings. That was why numerous misconceptions are found from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The poet was poor in the knowledge of astronomy. Therefore he did not have the clear conception about the size of the stars and planets. He did not have the opportunity to see the stars through telescope. So, whatever he has seen through the naked eyes, he wrote the same thing. That was his limitation. He described through Kumbhakarṇa, who said to Rāvaṇa that he forced the stars, planets and the Sun to fall down upon the earth³⁶. This shows that the poet did not have the knowledge about the gravitation force, the size of the stars and the Sun. He had the idea that the small stars and the Sun are hanging in the sky, and the earth is so vast that it can very easily accommodate and procure them. He

32. *Ibid.* 61/17-24.

33. *Uttara.* 10/36-39.

34. *Yuddha.* 60/17.

35. *Ibid.* 61/24.

36. *Ibid.* 63/54.

says: «The Sun every day rises from the other side of the mount Meru»³⁷. Therefore it is smaller than the earth. This conception given by the poet is undoubtedly erroneous.

THE VIEW OF THE POET

In order to successfully exhibit the prowess of Rāma, the hero of the epic, the poet Vālmīki conceived the powerful ten headed Rāvaṇa as the villain who had different philosophy of life. The presence of Kumbhakarṇa made Rāvaṇa more powerful whom ultimately Rāma killed in the battle. This enhanced the power and prestige of Rāma. Moreover, Kumbhakarṇa basically was a good man who was able to advise Rāvaṇa to give back Sītā³⁸. Here Rāvaṇa could not dare to kick him what he had done to Bibhīṣana few months earlier. Rather Rāvaṇa confessed his own mistake by saying: «Oh what to do; let bygone be bygone»³⁹. Let us not think of the past. «What has to be happened, that has happened». Kumbhakarṇa's character thus was a prestigious one in Laṅkā and it solves as a bridge between the character of Rāvaṇa and Bibhīṣana.

37. *Ibid.* 60/61.

38. *Ibid.* 63/21.

39. *Ibid.* 63/25. *Gataṃ tu nānusocanti gataṃ tu gatameva hi.*